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Intensive Mothering in Hard Times: Foucauldian Ethical Self-formation and Cruel Optimism

Discourses of intensive mothering now seem to dominate European and American parenting cultures. This is a problem for those mothers who don't currently possess the resources to match up. In a study of Italian and British mothers that are experiencing low or reduced incomes we observe the ways in which they internalize intensive mothering discourses through a process of ethical self-formation (Foucault, 1985). This mode of self-formation involves detailed self-surveillance and self-discipline and abnegation of their own needs in place of other individual family members, and the family as a whole. We find a series of contradictory emotional effects which generate both pride and self-worth but also stress and anxiety. We advance the theory that mothers operate within an optimistic affective regime to make sense of these contradictory effects and retain a sense of agency and control over their lives and those of their families. However, drawing on Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism, we argue that such affective regimes may be very pernicious in their effects, only serving to hold mothers in a relation that is ultimately impassable and often unfulfilling.

Key words: Intensive mothering, ethical self-formation, affective regimes, cruel optimism, Foucault, Berlant

Introduction

'Intensive mothering' is the term that has been used to describe a current intensification of mothering practices (Lee et al., 2014). Following Hays (1996: 8), intensive mothering 'requires the day-to-day labour of nurturing the child, listening to the child, attempting to decipher the child's needs and desires, struggling to meet the child's wishes, and placing the child's well-being ahead of their [mothers'] own convenience.' In addition such ideals of motherhood are based on practices that are 'child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive' (Hays, 1996:8).

As Hayes (1996) notes, intensive mothering paradoxically appears to rely on traditional gender norms (assuming the availability of time and willingness for mothers rather than fathers' intensive practices and emotional involvement) at a time when patterns of family life have changed considerably, with more women in the paid labour market. Recent sociological literature has documented that although discourses around fathering have changed (Dermott and Miller 2015) and many fathers intend to be actively involved in their children's care, they are more easily able to opt out of intensive parenting without seen as a 'bad parent' (Miller 2011). Thus, domestic responsibilities and cultural assumptions relating to gender and family life have been slower to change than women's position in the labour market (Hays, 1996).

As well as revealing gendered ideologies, commentators have argued that the discourse of intensive mothering is connected with social class. Despite many changing ways of thinking about and classifying social class (Savage et al., 2013) it arguably still operates powerfully as a marker of inclusion and exclusion, as well as a social identity (see for example Hanley, 2016;

McKenzie, 2015). Although partly about the ownership and control of resources, social class is also about culture, with working class culture traditionally being devaluated in relation to middle class norms (Bourdieu, 1984; Skeggs, 2004). Linked to this, the desire to demonstrate respectability is an important concern for those in less advantaged social class positions (Skeggs, 2004) and consumption can be a vehicle for trying to achieve and demonstrate this (Banister et al., 2016, Ponsford, 2011).

Commentators have highlighted that intensive parenting is undergirded by solidly middle class values and dispositions (Lareau, 2003; Duncan, 2005; Caputo, 2007; Perrier, 2012; Cairns et al., 2013), but that it has now become positioned as the standard of ‘good mothering’ across the social classes (Gillies et al., 2016). Some have highlighted how this discourse becomes even more problematic in contexts where mothers are time poor and/or financially strained (Leigh et al., 2012). This intensification of mothering has become identifiable since the 1990s and it requires mothers not only to put their child’s needs before their own in every respect, but to be able to display this to others through their everyday practices. At the same time, certain groups of mothers are left with fewer resources to do this, such as those living on low incomes (Romagnoli and Wall, 2012). We address this conundrum in this paper examining the impact on subjectivities and their attendant modes of coping in hard times.

The growing body of research on family life in poverty and low income emphasises some important gendered patterns. Women in poverty tend to have the main responsibility for feeding the family and ‘getting by’, managing economic resources with a careful orchestration of the flow of money in the household (Daly, 2015). Poverty management practices emphasise women’s ‘creative budgeting behaviour’ (Daly, 2015:6) including classifying and dividing the overall household income into hierarchically ordered categories -including rent, food, children’s activities (Zelizer, 1994; Daly, 2015; authors own) and cutting back from current expenditure to generate artificial affluence (Kochuyt, 2004). This careful re-directing of the flow of money requires a careful balancing of saving and spending which prioritises children and perpetuates women’s self-abnegation (Miller, 1998; authors own). Studies have shown how women in hardship prioritise children’s needs and desires when shopping and cooking (Miller, 1998, Hamilton, 2009). Indeed, putting the children first seems to be the unshakable moral imperative guiding what has been called the macro and micro management of resources in the household (Safilios-Rothschild, 1975; 1976; Pahl, 1983; Woolley and Marshall, 1994).

Research also suggests that mothers often harbor contradictory feelings about their role in times of hardship at the same time expressing their sense of insecurity and inadequacy and their sense of self-reliance and pride (Hutton, 2015; 2016). Some authors highlight how in low-income households mothers’ self-sacrifice is seen as an act of upholding parental honour (Kochuyt, 2004), of displaying good and devotional mothering (Hamilton and Catterall, 2006; Miller, 1998) but also as an ‘interested’ rather than ‘disinterested’ gift that parents provide demanding loyalty and affection from their children (Daly, 2015). Sacrificing their own desires to make ends meet is a way in which a woman ‘conducts herself as recognizably womanly’ (De Vault, 1991:118), displaying agency, managerial skills and self-resilience (Hutton, 2016). While some studies highlight positive elements of these experiences, the majority of work on hardship highlights how women experience anxiety, stress, depression, a sense of humiliation and guilt (see Hutton, 2015 for an overview), as they ‘are held accountable for the performance of this work in ways that men are not’ (Erickson, 2005:348). They also tend to keep such emotions to themselves, becoming emotional buffers that spare other family members from the negative emotions of daily hardship (authors own).

From the above discussion we observe two significant absences. While there seems to be plenty of research that explores the everyday practices of getting by and putting children first, we know much less about how these practices intersect within motherly subjectivities. In particular, it would be useful to know more about how the twin discourses of intensive mothering and thrift are internalized by these mothers. Secondly we know little about the emotions involved in and made visible through this process. While we know that women living under economic pressure experience contradictory feelings, we are left with little understanding of how such contradictions coexist to form the overall emotional texture of their everyday lives. To address these absences, we turn to Foucault's conceptualisation of ethical self-formation (1985), we begin with a discussion of this, exploring how it intersects with discourses of intensive mothering. After outlining the methodology, we present the narratives of ten Italian and twelve British mothers using the themes of self-discipline, deviations and justifications. In doing so we highlight the relentlessness and minutiae of everyday decision making and self-discipline, and the elaborate justifications given for deviations from a path of thrift and frugality. We also explore the attendant emotions of stress and anxiety but also pride and self-worth. In closing we discuss the implications of getting by for motherly subjectivities and examine how optimistic affective regimes might be central in helping them to cope. However, drawing on Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism, we argue that such regimes might serve to hold mothers in a relation that is ultimately unworkable.

Intensive mothering and ethical self-formation

Hays (1996) is widely cited as being the first to identify the term intensive mothering. She suggests that there are four key elements to this parenting ideology: that mothers are positioned as more suitable caregivers than fathers; that mothering should be child-centered; that parenting consists of a set of skills that need to be learnt and that parenting *per se* is labour intensive but an emotionally fulfilling activity. Folded into this view is an increased responsibility for children's outcomes and future success which is cognizant with neoliberalism (Littler, 2013; Gillies et al., 2016). In addition, this mothering style is entangled with concerned consumption (Brusdal and Frønes, 2013), as mothers see consumption as a way of fostering children's skills and potentials (Vincent et al., 2013). Such intensified consumption has been linked with the pressure to display 'good' mothering in everyday mundane practices (Cairns et al., 2013; Henderson et al., 2010; authors own) showing that certain consumption practices and items demonstrate 'good' mothering.

Budds et al., (2017) show how new mothers in England monitor themselves in relation to intensive mothering practices believed to optimize infants' cognitive development. Such mothers were found to experience guilt and worry when they felt they were not matching up to the ideal of constantly entertaining and stimulating their children. Henderson and her colleagues (2010) talk about a Panopticon-like society, characterized by women's growing sense of being surveilled through institutionalized encounters with professionals but also through more informal everyday interactions with fellow mothers. Indeed, as Sutherland observes of the intensive mothering ideology: 'as long as mothers are exposed to this ideology, they risk being locked into a kind of prison, bound by the myths of motherhood' (2010: 313). If such a sense of being under-surveillance has been described as a typical characteristic of the intensified, middle class way of mothering, more recently authors have highlighted how such a parenting style has become the normalized mode of displaying and judging good motherhood

and as such working class mothers also feel the pressure to perform intensive mothering (Romagnoli and Wall, 2012; Henderson et al., 2016; Hutton 2015; 2016). Furthermore, such surveillance generates what has been called “mother-blame” (Henderson et al., 2010; 2016) which reinforces the pressure on working class women generating a sense of guilt and anxiety in their failure to achieve the never fully achievable target of middle-class intensive mothering.

The aforementioned studies have emphasised mechanisms of surveillance in current motherhood, often making analogies with Foucault’s work. For example, Budds et al., (2017) note how mothers’ narratives often reflect ‘the expectations placed upon women to engage in a technology of the self – to act upon themselves and shape their subjectivities and practices in accordance with contemporary norms and expectations of motherhood’ (2017:347). As Foucault (1975) argues, the Panopticon creates docile bodies which having internalized disciplinary practices and act as if they are constantly under-surveillance even when they are not.

For those who do not fully conform to the disciplinary power, subjectivities emerge including deviants, criminals and, as some have argued, bad mothers, who often coincide with working class mothers deviating from the middle class ideals of intensive mothering (May, 2008; Whitley and Kirmayer, 2008; Romagnoli and Wall, 2012; Newman and Henderson, 2014; authors own). For example, in their studies of state-driven educational programmes promoting child cognitive development, Romagnoli and Wall (2012) highlight how working class mothers experience prescriptive and regulative techniques aimed at internalizing the intensive mothering ideals and practices. Despite these women’s efforts to negotiate and sometimes resist such ideals, their experience of being under surveillance was reported as one of most prominent characteristics of these programs.

If from these studies we understand how schools, educational programmes and professionals create a surveilling environment promoting the ideals of intensive mothering, here we are interested in understanding the process of self-surveillance, which, despite being recognized as a trait of current motherhood, has received very little attention in the literature. Douglas and Michaels (2004: 6) speak of intensive mothering as constant state of mind characterised by self-sacrifice and ‘psychological police state’ wherein mothers constantly surveil and judge themselves. We unpack this notion of self-surveillance with what has been called Foucault’s ethical turn, in which he discusses the formation of subjectivity outside the discourses and practices of power-relations, typical of his early work. Foucault’s ethics of the self (1985) is about the formation of the self, through the production of a way of living that is embraced rather than being imposed in a Panopticon-like system. However, this is not to say that Foucault studies the formation of the self in a neoliberal perspective, seeing subjectivities as a matter of individual choice. As he said:

I am not interested in how the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion through practice of the self, these practices are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon himself by his culture, his society, and his social group” (2003: 34)

If some have posed the question of intensive mothering as simply a choice for all mothers (Rizzo et al., 2013), we agree with Henderson and her colleagues (2016) that the powerful dominant ideology of intensive mothering affects all women regardless their social class, ethnic background and household composition and financial situation. This is demonstrated by the growing body of work showing how consumption is now seen by mothers from different social

classes a way of showing good mothering and respectability (The Voice 2010; Bannister et al. 2016; author own). Indeed empirical works illuminate how the everyday consumption of objects including baby clothes (McNeil and Graham, 2014), prams (Thomsen and Sørensen, 2006) and toys (authors own publication) is crucial in displaying ‘good’ mothering to the self and to relevant audiences. In line with this understanding of intensive mothering as the dominant ideology, we look at how women engage with such ideology in adapting such principles for guiding their own conduct. We do so by looking at how they make sense of such principles and how in such processes of sense making their subjectivities emerge. In the *Use of Pleasure* Foucault (1985) describes a schema for understanding the intentional work that an individual does on herself to set up moral principles guiding her conduct. Moral principles, or principles of self-forming emerge from a complex process starting with delimiting aspects of self that are morally problematic and taking them as objects of reflection (ethical substance or ontology). This is then followed by the so called mode of subjectification (deontology) in which individuals create a relationship to their moral code and, being bounded to it, they orient their actions in accordance with such a code. The ethical work (ascetics) is then a set of practices, which Foucault called technologies of the self, ensuring that individuals transformed themselves into ethical agents. These practices are linked to the principles of self-discipline, abstention and self-denial. Such practices of self-discipline are aimed at achieving an ideal mode or status of being, which Foucault called telos or teleology.

From the aforementioned literature on current mothering we understand how the subjectification process is at play. Indeed, mothers from a range of backgrounds appear to regard the principles of intensive mothering as the ones against which motherhood is measured. Even if they do not follow such principles themselves, mothers have been found to be reconciling their ‘deviant’ subjectivity against the dominant discourse (Henderson et al., 2016). What is less clear in the literature is how such principles are then translated into technologies of the self and what subjectivities emerge from this process.

Research Methods

This paper emerges from a wider study looking at how women feed their family in hard times. Elsewhere we provided a detailed description of the everyday practices of managing limited financial resources (authors own) and an analysis of how cultural, economic and social capitals are at play in such daily management (authors own). Previously we have highlighted the different strategies, practices and skills enacted by participants in order to make ends meet, here we look at the subjectivities emerging from such practices, highlighting similarities and differences emerging in the two contexts. We look at subjectivities emerging from such practices in a comparative perspective, as it emerged from the analysis of semi-structured interviews with 12 British and 10 Italian women. As well documented in the literature, Italy and the UK have been severely hit by recession and austerity policies which have a significant impact in family life and indeed in the everyday management of households’ resources (see for example, D’Ippoliti and Roncaglia, 2011; Karamessini and Rubery 2014; O’Hara 2015; Sassatelli et al. 2015). For this reason, the two countries were selected for analysis.

Findings emerged from a thematic analysis of data from semi-structured conducted with 12 British women (4 living in the Midlands, 2 living in Essex and the remaining living in the London area) and 10 Italian women living in Florence and surrounding areas. In the Italian

context we interviewed 15 women, but for the purpose of this paper we have included mothers only. Women were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Silverman, 2006). The main recruiting criteria was to interview women who were dealing with financial constraints due to the current crisis, and such we relied on participants' self-assessment of their financial situations more than their household income and other measures to classify their wealth. All the households have at least one family member in full time employment and as are able to access only limited welfare support, however participants also highlighted financial difficulties due to personal circumstances such as being on maternity leave, having experienced a salary reduction and being on a short-term contract. Table 1 provides an overview of key characteristics of the informants.

Given the limited number of participants and the snowballing technique used, we do not aim to provide an analysis representing all women facing financial hardship, but rather to provide an "in depth analysis of the life stories expressed by a relatively small number of participants" (Thompson, 1996: 392). The women in this study are not all categorised as living in poverty using official government measures, but they are united by a personal identification that they are 'managing on less', either through a persistently low income or one that has been reduced significantly due to recession or personal circumstances. Broadly speaking, women from the Italian sample tended to identify more with middle class backgrounds and leisure activities but noted a significant drop in income as a result of the recession. As these women had to 'cut back', they activated new coping mechanisms and some, for example, asked their own families to support them, paying their household bills, rent or mortgage, which in the past, they were able to do on their own. The British sample tended to see themselves as working class with longer term histories of managing on a low income, and some (particularly the lone parents interviewed) commented that they were presently in a more favorable position than they had been in the past due to their current employment circumstances.

As women were the main person responsible for feeding the family and for the overall management of the financial resources of the households, interviews investigated the mundane practices of such management, the division of labour and responsibility for the household and participants' feelings surrounding their situation. With participants consent, interviews were recorded and successively transcribed verbatim, coded and analysed thematically by the research team. Interviews in Italy were conducted in Italian by the two Italian authors and translated into English by both authors. The final interpretation of the data emerged from a collective interpretation and a continuous iteration between data analysis and the literature on mothering in hard times. Our thematic analysis and interpretation of the data leads to the individuation of three main themes surrounding the overall concept of self- discipline. These (gendered self-discipline, deviation and justification) are presented below.

Gendered self- discipline

From the interviews it emerged that participants see the work of disciplining and coping in hard times as their own work. Women often perceived that their husbands or partners do not fully understand or consider the everyday domestic pressure of coping with limited resources. For example, Rose explained that she was very thrifty in her day-to-day life, always making herself a packed lunch if she was away from home and avoiding buying food and drink outside of the home in order to reduce expenditure. She contrasted this with her husband's more casual and unplanned spending:

I think men don't really think about sort of like, "Oh, I'm just going to go for a fry up," or, "I'm just going to grab a McDonalds". I don't think they think about things like that (Rose, UK)

Rose positions her husband's (and in her narrative, other men's) out of home food purchases as extravagant. Although the cost of each meal may not be huge (the choice of a fast-food restaurant being a cheaper option than a gourmet restaurant, for example) Rose implies that such spending is somewhat irresponsible as it could be avoided through more careful planning and a focus on the bigger picture of cumulative spending and its impact on family finances. Rose argues that the work of 'thinking' about the family's limited resources is seen as primarily her own responsibility which is not evenly shared, practically or emotionally, among all family members. As is well documented in the literature (see for example Beagan et al., 2008), participants justify such an unequal distribution of the domestic labour with their partners' limited practical skills and scarce management abilities to organise the budgeting practices of their households. The gendered nature of this responsibility seemed to cut across both UK and Italian samples. As Ilaria explains in relation to the Italian context:

Unfortunately, in Italy women are the ones managing the organisation of the household. It has always been like this. Even if husbands and partners can give their support, the overall organisation is up to women. Your partner executes what you tell him to do (Ilaria, Italy)

Having established that women 'have to be the director of the household', as one of Italian participants says, participants in both contexts appear to have internalised what Foucault (1985) called the process of subjectification, in which individuals are bounded with principles guiding their lives, and without questioning them, they orient their actions in accordance with them. Such findings are in line with existing research which suggests that although narratives of equality between men and women are present, change is relatively slow within the domestic sphere (Erickson, 2005; Hutton 2015; Miller, 2011; Pahl 1983; Woolley and Marshall 1994). From the existing literature (Kochuyth 2004; Hamilton 2009; Daly 2015; authors own) we also have detailed descriptions of how women's everyday practices of organising family life on a low income operate. Here it emerges how such work is framed as self-discipline, understood as the restless work of planning and controlling the spending of economic resources, avoiding "temptations", as some of our respondents call expenses that deviate from the strict routine of food items. Such a work of self-discipline is actualised through the use of routinised and often taken for granted objects and practices, which Foucault (1985) called them technologies of the self. Practices include using a diary for short and long term planning, making shopping lists following the order of the display in the supermarket (to reduce the possibility of being "tempted" in the shop), and using scan-as-you-go machines in supermarket to have a constant control of expenditure. For example, Katie uses her diary, which she also calls her Bible, to plan her monthly expenses (such as bills and mortgage) weekly shops, but also annual expenses

including the MOT for her car, Christmas presents, birthday and other regular events, and extra school activities.

In this (her diary) I plan like all my week and there's bits where I write down my meal, what I'm planning for meals and then you can write a shopping list. So I just then take that. In the back I have all my finances, so every month all my outgoings and when it goes out of the bank I can tick it off. Just because I have to be on such a tight budget [...] If I'm not organised and plan not only the meals and the finances we'd just get into a mess really, everything's very tight. (Katie, UK)

It is interestingly to note how Katie describes the work of budgeting as her own work using the pronoun *I*, which is later replaced with *we* in describing the possible consequences of such a work (*we'd just get into a mess*). This alternating between “I” and “we” and “I” and “he” is a common aspect in descriptions of everyday practices, it reveals how the disciplinary work of the self is a relational one, in which women adapt their guiding principles as a matter of being with other family members. For example, Elena talked about how her work of coping is mainly a matter of disciplining the self but also ‘educating’ her husband:

I am in charge of the organisation of the house and I have a very detailed list that I follow faithfully. I avoid temptations, I am a soldier! I am the brain of the house... the only one (laughing) I have to say that I had to train him (husband), with a very strict attitude. Husbands need to be educated like your own children. (Elena, Italy)

Although such participants describe the work of educating others as very frustrating, they also reveal an overall sense of pride for being able to make ends meet (see also Hutton, 2016). If all admit that their male partners do not fully understand their restless work of coping which makes them feel exhausted, they also explain their complex feelings of satisfaction gained from it.

There is resignation and joy. This [doing all the coping work] gives you an overall satisfaction because it makes you realise that you are better than him in many aspects, but, at the same time, it shows that you gave up and you do everything yourself! I am resigned to that now. (Ilaria, Italy)

As we will discuss later, this mix of resignation, satisfaction, pride and stress could be seen as the effect of participants’ role within the family, which, although at a first glance could be seen as a subordinated position, can be interpreted in a more complex way. In fact, women’s sense of being in control of the budgeting is seen by some participants like Ilaria as a way of showing to themselves to be *better* than their partners.

Deviations

I think what I have to do is cut back, maybe have jacket potato or beans on toast for a couple of weeks before to put the extra money aside because I need things like presents. Everything that you need for Christmas you need to budget for. (Fiona, UK)

Here Fiona’s self-discipline of ‘cutting back’ echoes previous works highlighting how the flow of resources in households is directed to children who do not participate in the implementation

of saving (Kochuyth, 2004; Daly, 2015). Despite such a self-imposed discipline women also talk about little, less visible deviations requiring a less demanding sacrifice. A special offer in the supermarket, giving in to a child's request for a branded and more expensive packet of crisps, 'little treats' deviating from the self-discipline occur frequently. When such deviations happen resources are not allocated beforehand, but need to be saved in the next shopping trip in order to accommodate the previous treat. Mothers talk of these deviations as enactment of 'doing good mothering' and participating fully in family life. Such deviations show how the rigorous self-discipline often does not work and bending the rules occur in the name of the wellbeing of the children and good family life. However, when such deviations cannot be performed, an overall sense of guilt seems to appear in their narratives.

I always feel guilty that Dave is a 37 year old man who works full time, he's hard working and supports his family, he's never even got a couple of cans of beer in the fridge. [...] I mean things like that, most men wouldn't accept that I don't think. They would say, "Why haven't you got me my luxuries," but he would never complain (Katie, UK)

Katie complimented her husband for his role of breadwinner and his abstinence from his own 'luxuries' which she feels she should provide for him. If Katie forces herself to adhere to a very strict and thrifty routine, she feels that her husband should be entitled to be exempt and to have some daily treats for himself, including beers in the fridge. Katie's narrative suggests a contradiction – she seems to infantilise her husband as 'another child' who 'needs' his luxuries and treats – even as she is complimenting him for his role as breadwinner and his lack of criticism of her provisioning. Katie does not speak of any guilt (felt by herself or Dave) in relation to herself working hard and going without luxuries.

In Italy Claudia's husband has his own 'luxuries' that, although she tends to downplay, represent purchases for himself rather than for the collective family or for the children. Her narrative is a vivid example of how deviations are seen differently when performed by husbands.

I take pleasure in buying some extra things for my children. For my husband is different. His salary is shared but if he wants to buy something for his own pleasure, he buys things for himself. He does not think about the children as I do. He has the passion of taking pictures and occasionally he buys some accessories. Last spring, for example, he bought a new camera and spent a lot (Claudia, Italy)

Claudia admits getting her own pleasure in doing shopping for her children. As we will see in the next section, shopping for children's clothes and planning educational and domestic activities are described as fulfilling practices displaying good mothering. This indeed echoes the existing literature on intensive mothering in which the marketplace provides women various occasions for displaying their mothering skills, for satisfying their children's desires and fulfilling women's sense of satisfaction and indeed pleasure (Lee et al., 2014). Such fulfillment is achieved after careful planning, thrifty shopping and extreme sacrifice including reducing or changing a mother's own diet, as the above quotation from Fiona illustrates. It is noteworthy to highlight how husbands are described as apart from the sacrifice of performing intensive parenting. In fact, husbands' deviations are described as their own luxuries, less likely to be shared with others. Claudia and Katie's husbands seems to be set apart from the overall family planning of resources; their own interest and related consumption practices deviate from their planning of family's activities and shopping for children. However, it is interesting to note that our participants did not criticize their male partners, but instead justified and minimized

their behavior by emphasizing that ‘he is good with the children’ and ‘he does not spend much on himself’. If Italian and British husbands are often ridiculed for their inabilities to ‘think’ and manage resources efficiently, they are also presented in a way that justifies their inabilities to resist temptations. They are presented almost as another child in the family requiring care, attention, supervision and rewards for hard work.

If most of our participants’ deviations happened in name of the children and the family, there were also examples of hedonic consumption of benefit to mothers themselves that deviated from the overall sense of discipline and self-control.

I think it was three weeks ago when I bought this [a dress she was wearing]. It was £5 out of Primark, £5. I went into Primark to buy the children stuff because they needed summer stuff and I bought myself this. I need some stuff for my nails as well. I’m debating, “Shall I? Shan’t I? Shall I? Shan’t I?” It’s always in your mind - shall I? I just haven’t bought it yet because all the time my brain is like, “Can I afford to spend £12 on...?” (Liz, UK)

Liz’s tormenting questions about the ‘necessity’ of buying or not buying some nail varnish for herself confirms how items deviating from women’s technologies of the self are perceived as an interruption of their self-sacrifice devoted to the family. Since pursuing hedonic consumption is seen as an extraordinary occasion, women tend to raise important interrogations of what is considered a justifiable deviation from the strict routine of thrifty shopping. Similarly Rose explains this as a constant negotiation process “It’s just negotiating that with yourself really, “Can I justify having this?” Women tend to frame deviations from thrift enacted for themselves in tormenting terms, as this represent a deviation from the unshakable mothering principle to put children’s needs first (Hays, 1998; McCarthy et al., 2000) and their own subjectivities constructed around doing mothering with limited financial resources (see also Daly, 2015). As we will illustrate this in the next section, such a negotiation shows the priorities and criteria that these women apply in deciding whether to deviate or not from self-discipline.

Justifications

Given that most of the deviations are redirected to the children and some family activities, the overall justification for deviating from the everyday thrift is mainly framed as the mantra of “putting the children first” (McCarthy et al., 2000), in which the current dominant ideology of intensive mothering does not need to be justified.

The only thing that it is important at present is to give to the children the things that I really care about. Giving them a good education. I do not want to deprive them to things that are important, everything else does not matter as much (Claudia, Italy)

My thing that I would spend money on is the boys. Maybe if they needed some new clothes or I like to take them somewhere like go to Dewey’s Farm or something like that. I wait till we’ve got a little bit of extra money if I want something or I feel I need something. I can go ages without – I’ll need to dye my hair and it will be ages before I’ve got a spare fiver to get the dye (Fiona, UK)

As shown in the above quotes, in both context mothers tend to prioritise children’s educational needs which are developed via consumption activities including visiting farms, museums and

family events. Viewing these as occasions for fostering children's cultural and social capitals, participants do not feel the need to articulate or justify these decisions, since they adhere to the intensive mothering principles (Hays, 1998; Lee et al., 2014). These extraordinary consumption occasions required an a priori saving, which is planned and directed by participants, but performed by the entire family.

You need to be very organised when you plan a family day out. You go by public transport instead of using your own car, you make your own sandwiches, so you can have the money to visit some museums or family activities. This is the way I can give my daughter the chance to do activities that other children do and especially children of her age (Claudia, Italy)

Such a redirecting of resources, described by Claudia as a matter of planning, reminds us of the mechanism of saving and spending that Miller (1998) described in his account of mothers' everyday shopping. If Miller's participants aimed at saving money in order to indulge their children with treats and gifts providing instant enjoyment, our participants tend to have more specific ideas of how to gratify their children, providing experiential and educational experiences, echoing the intensive mothering ideology (Brusdal and Frønes, 2013; Vincent et al., 2013). In describing such ideas in which leisure activities are also aimed at matching cultural and social norms and expectations (what other children do), our participants reveal how they tend to maximise resources not simply in material terms, but also symbolically. For example, activities such as growing fruit and vegetables in the garden are presented as learning and leisure activities fostering children's potential and developing their skills. Being able to create artificial affluence from financial resources and planning leisure and educational activities that 'do not cost you anything' is indeed a source of pride for participants, since it shows their constant devotional love towards their children (Miller, 1998; Hamilton and Catterall, 2006) and their entrepreneurial attitude toward children's development (see Perrier, 2012).

If participants were at ease explaining how the family's resources were redirected towards children, expenses for mothers' personal consumption required more carefully planned justifications, showing how the negotiation process was a complex and often tormenting one.

This afternoon I am going to see a homoeopathist as I do not feel very well. Albert [husband] does not know this, as it is expensive: 50 quid for a visit and some medicines. I have a sun allergy and my GP has not been very helpful. I have been very bad in the last two years, so I am going to try this. [...] He will think that this is a lot of money. I am borrowing this money from my saving account, and then I will put back 10 pounds per week. I really need to do this, as this allergy is keeping me awake at night. Last night I was awake until 2 scratching myself (Liz, UK).

If deviations for family and children's activities are sources of creativity and pride, expenses for the self are often described with an overall sense of guilt, anxiety and discomfort, here expressed by Liz deciding not to tell her husband about her medical appointment. Liz's narrative poses questions about why women's spending on themselves needs to be justified in terms of health. It appears that health provides a moral justification for such mothers and thus invoking it does not jeopardize participants' subjectivities based on abstinence and self-sacrifice (see also Hamilton, 2009). Health is the morally grounded criteria that participants use for justifying their deviations, since taking care of their body implies taking care not simply of themselves but of their role as carers of the family. There are also cases, mostly in the Italian context, in which mothers talk more openly of their overall sense of entitlement toward hedonic

consumption, which is not framed as ‘good for the children and the family’, but simply as “good for myself”. The most evident case is represented by Ilaria and her idea of bending rules.

You have to be able to bend rules once in a while, otherwise it becomes unbearable! I am constantly worn out from the morning until the evening. Being able to go to the cinema or to the theater once in a while is the only way I can relax and find some energy to keep going.

Interviewer: *How do you feel about going to the cinema with your friends?*
I deserve it.

Although Ilaria affirms that she deserves to be able to cultivate her own interests, she speaks of this as a way of bending rules and creating extraordinary occasions in which her own luxuries, to use Katie’s terminology, can be satisfied. Seen as an interruption to an everyday life that might otherwise become unbearable, her hedonic consumption is described as an exception to the rule, reaffirming the overall principles of mothering as a self-sacrifice practice. Also, it is notable that it is framed as matter of rewarding previous performances and finding energy for future performances.

Coping with Emotions: The Affective Regime of Cruel Optimism

The subjectivities emerging from an everyday life of self-discipline and sacrifice have complex and contradictory traits. Participants experience stress, anxiety and worry in undertaking the mundane tasks of shopping, feeding children and in all other practices surrounding the work of doing mothering. Measuring themselves against the ideal of intensive mothering, which stipulates that children’s needs must come first, these women experience frustration and guilt for never fully achieving such an ideal and, in some cases, perceiving themselves far from it. Simultaneously we identified a sense of guilt from women like Katie that their partners were going without deserved luxuries. Subject to strict principles of ‘good mothering’ which in both contexts resonate with the dominant discourse of intensive mothering, plus gender norms that often seem slow to shift in the privacy of the domestic sphere (Miller, 2011) these women might be thought of in Foucauldian terms as ‘docile’ mothers as they have tamed their own lives to follow ideals of self-sacrifice. This is not framed as a ‘choice’, something that women have planned and selected for themselves, but more as a naturalized pattern that they follow because this is ‘the way things are’ and ‘this is what mums do’. Religious and military terms recur in participants’ narratives – ‘I am a soldier’, ‘this is my Bible’ - highlighting the sense of discipline and faith that these women unquestionably impose upon themselves. One participant talked about resignation and surrender as something that can be reflexively discussed in interviews, but not changed.

Measured against their partners, the subjectivities of these women become even more complex. Describing their partners in ironic terms, comparing them to children who ‘do not think’ about wider concerns of managing on a limited income, these women value themselves as simply (and morally) superior. They describe flaws in their husbands’ conduct which do not correspond to the parental ideal of sacrifice and discipline. Considered unruly actors who cannot fully tame their own desires, men are excluded from women’s devotional love, simply because they are considered ‘not up to the task’. This discrepancy of conduct is a source of frustration but it also bolsters our participants’ sense of pride and of being in control. Such descriptions of their partners as irresponsible and unruly also draw on moral discourses of housework and food provisioning in which ‘matters of what is fair, right, just and virtuous are

always present' (Fenstermacher, 1990: 133). Thus complex subjectivities emerge here in relational terms, as women's discipline, self-control and sacrifice operate not simply in relation to their role of mothering, but also in relation to the roles of others within the family. As such their mothering has provided them 'opportunities to demonstrate creativity and skill, as well as to accrue value within their families and communities, and even to provide opportunities to express resistance and empowerment within personal and structural relations' (Meah, 2013: 2). However, we should be careful not to be too celebratory about women's empowerment, undergirded as it is by the unshakable principles of devotional motherhood. This is evident when women talk about their decisions to bend rules, relax the boundaries and create opportunities to deviate from self-discipline. Interestingly women's deviations are usually described as a matter of 'doing family' and doing 'good' mothering, while husbands' deviations are seen as creating spaces for their own leisure and pleasure which do not need to be 'paid back'. Deviations performed outside of family life require strong ethical justifications which are usually based around health and well-being. Indeed, even when women admit to creating occasions for their own pleasure – for example, going to the cinema with friends- these are justified in the neoliberal terms of 'deserving them' as a reward for having efficiently executed work tasks and helping them to continue their work of 'good mothering'. Despite the hardship of their everyday lives, our participants remain positive when talking about their future:

We both always say to each other, "When we're a bit better off we'll have this or we'll make sure we do this. Put that one right in the back of the diary: "Things to do later" (Katie, UK)

I am optimistic and hope that things will get better eventually. I cannot see how and why, but what can I do? Shall I live my life in constant anxiety? I hope to be able to give a good education to my daughter and to perhaps have another child, who knows... (Valeria, Italy)

Despite the differences between the family life that women live and the one they dream of, these women remain anchored to the idea of the good life and good mothering and obstinately they try to pursue it. Participants like Katie who juggled her finances by writing down every purchase in her 'Bible', expressed their overall sense of hope for the future which is articulated through consumption activities typical of the middle class discourses of good family life. Dreams of exotic holidays are in sharp contrast with the everyday life in which a little indulgence such as buying a nail varnish requires financial juggling and moral questioning. Despite such a contrast, we think that mundane deviations and big dreams are both part of women's attempts to fantasise about and taste the good life, and to maintain an overall optimistic attitude toward the present and the future. We think that this overall optimism represents a key affective regime within which mothers make sense of complex demands at the level of subjectivity as well as the contrasting feelings of joy and resentment, anxiety and pride, frustration and pleasure.

Our understanding of participants' optimism comes from Berlant's (2011) idea of cruel optimism, which we think captures the complexity of the subjectivities of the mothers in the study. Following Berlant (2011), despite a deterioration of social, cultural and economic conditions of post-war neoliberal societies, individuals still remain optimistic as they are attached to the seductive capitalistic ideal of a 'good life', which, in the examples she provides, could be summarized with the middle class ideals of secure jobs and wealthy lifestyles popularized after WW2. She calls this attachment to a 'good life' fantasy *cruel optimism*. As she explains, cruel optimism:

‘exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce you an improved way of being. These kind of optimistic relations are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aims that brought you to it initially’ (2011:1).

If the object of desire is not cruel *per se*, the relation of attachment that is created is what becomes cruel, as individuals are attached to ‘clusters of promises’ (Berlant, 2011:23) even when such promises are unattainable. In our case these clusters of promises are complex but they all relate to living a good family life, spending quality time together as a family, occasions in which children are sovereign subjects to be cherished and protected at any cost. Optimism is thus a structural feeling, exemplified in the attachment to the good life fantasy that people sustain. As Berlant (2008:4) says, if we distinguish between ‘the structure of an affect and the experience we associate with a typical emotional event’ we can see how the optimistic attachment to the fantasy of a good life is then experienced in a daily ‘crisis ordinariness’ i.e. the way people make it through even when the day-to-day has become unlivable. In other words, the attachment to the good life fantasy is optimistic, even when the feelings experienced in daily life might not be optimistic at all.

Conclusion

Returning to our initial concerns about the lack of understanding of the twin impacts of intensive mothering and economic constraints on motherly subjectivities, our Foucauldian perspective on ethical self-formation has offered insight into how the practices of sacrifice, thrift and self-abnegation not only serve to make up motherly subjectivities but to govern mothers through their own self-discipline. As such our participants continually re-adjust their lives in times when living with a tighter budget, as for these women self-sacrifice has become the ordinary technology of the self. In this respect they live in a constant relation of ‘crisis ordinariness’ (Berlant, 2011). As noted by previous commentators, the intensive mothering ideology has practical implications in terms of positioning mothers as the most appropriate actor to perform certain tasks (such as the stimulation of babies’ brains or feeding children) and holding them responsible for outcomes through the mantra of parental determinism (Budds et al., 2017). However, this approach also recognizes the moral discourse of housework and foodwork which ‘encourages attention to the cultural and personal meaning of activity, interaction and sentiment’ (Ahlander and Bahr, 1995: 65). This is important because while these technologies of the self hold women in a relation in which managing household finances and doing the everyday shopping is seen by them as their naturalized ‘calling’, this calling may also be seen as a contribution to the common good both of the family and wider society. Indeed historically speaking a widely recognized consequence of that calling has been a recognition of their moral superiority (Bellah et al, 1985: 88).

Our second set of concerns surrounded a lack of understanding of the emotions involved in making ends meet. In particular this relates to how mothers deal with, and make sense of the contradictory emotions they experience. We argue that such emotions are structured by and located within a wider affective regime which has Berlant’s (2011) conception of structural optimism at its heart. We use the term affect here to refer to a wider field of intensities that may travel between bodies and between bodies and objects, existing beyond cognition and which isn’t located within the individual (Clough, 2007). As such affective regimes serve to

condition and give structure to emotions. In this way – even though everyday life may be emotionally demanding for mothers – these emotions are understood and made sense of in relation to a structural regime of optimism. The ideology of intensive mothering clearly has structural optimism (regarding the potential for a future good life for the family, and in particular the children), folded into it. As such we argue that intensive mothering may well represent an affective (sub)regime of the dominant affective regime of neoliberalism. It is somewhat ironic that the affective regimes surrounding intensive mothering should only serve to further embed mothers within neoliberalism; because it is likely that this parenting ideology emerged as a direct counter response to a neoliberal system in which individual interest, as opposed to care for others, is paramount. However, whatever the source, it is this optimism that allows mothers in our sample to keep on, keeping on, and as such it shouldn't be easily dismissed.

Looking ahead optimism about the material possibilities of a good life which is just around the corner needs to change, as they are arguably simply unsustainable as they stand. Berlant argues that we should respond to the imposition of austerity by reconstructing what counts as the good life: 'The demands of the present mean protesting not only the state's servility to capital but people's very own fantasies of the good life. Just as the relations of the market to the state are fraying and changing, so too the destruction and elaboration of fantasy in relation to what a life is and what a good life is will need to shift about and reknit' (Berlant, 2010).

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Table 1. Profile of participants

Name	Age	Education	Household	Occupation	Partner's occupation	Household annual income
Alice (Italy)	35	Degree	Living with her husband and her 1-year-old son in their own house	Freelance press agent	Administrator	£11-20,000
Arianna (Italy)	35	Degree	Living with her husband and two children (2 and 4 years) in their own house	High school teacher	Legal profession	€ 21-30,000
Vittoria (Italy)	35	Master Degree	Living with husband and her 1-year-old daughter in their own house	Supply teacher	Administrator (short-term contract)	€ 11-20,000
Roberta (Italy)	36	Master Degree	Living with her husband and her 6-year-old daughter in a rented flat	Freelance lawyer	Legal profession	€ 21-30,000
Costanza (Italy)	37	High school	Living with her husband and two children (4 and 5 years) in their own house	Freelancer in marketing communication	Line manager in banking sector	€ 31-40,000
Elena (Italy)	40	Part-time undergraduate student	Living with her	Administrator	Builder	€ 21-30,000

			husband and her 4-year-old daughter in their own house			
Federica (Italy)	40	Degree	Living with her partner and her 2-year-old son in their own house	Administrator	Legal profession	€ 21-30,000
Ilaria (Italy)	40	High school	Living with her partner and her 7-year-old daughter in their own house	Administrator	Workman	€ 11-20,000
Claudia (Italy)	41	Degree	Living with her husband and her two children (2 and 4 years) in their own house	Administrator (short-term contract)	Administrator	€ 21-30,000
Francesca (Italy)	42	High school	Living with her husband and her 4-year-old daughter in their own house	Part-time administrator	Salesman	€ 21-30,000
Katie (UK)	38	Degree	Living with her husband and three children (12, 7 and 2) in their own house	Part time designer	Full time college lecturer	£31-40,000
Fiona (UK)	36	High school	Living with her 12 year old and 5 month old daughters in a rented house	Part time administrator	N/A	£11-20,000
Sarah (UK)	43	Degree	Living with husband	Part time nurse	Full time administrator	£31-40,000

			and 7 year old twins in their own house			
Emily (UK)	42	High school	Living with her partner and four children (aged 21, 12, 12 and 7) in a rented house	Part time administrator	Unemployed	£21-30,000
Liz(UK)	40	High school	Living with her husband and six children (aged 19, 17, 13, 11, and 7 and 2) in a rented house	Stay-at-home mother	Builder on short time contract	£11-20,000
Rose(UK)	32	Degree	Living with her partner and two children (aged 3 and 6 months) in a rented house	Teacher on maternity leave	Part-time builder	£21-30,000
Jo (UK)	29	High school	Living with her partner and four children (aged 9, 6, 4 and 2) in a rented house	Stay-at-home mother	Shop assistant	£21-30,000
Helen (UK)	39	High school	Living with her 17 year old daughter in a part-buy/ part-rent housing association house	Administrator	N/A	£21-30,000
Kirsty (UK)	38	High school	Living with her 7 year old daughter in	Administrator	N/A	£21-30,000

			a rented house			
Priya (UK)	38	Undergraduate degree	Lives with her husband and two children (aged 2 and 9) in a rented flat	Stay-at home mother	Full time salesman	£21-30,000
Serena (UK)	40	No qualifications	Lives with her husband and 4 children (aged 5, 13, 18 and 20) in a part-buy/ part-rent housing association house	Stay-at home mother	Painter and decorator	£21-30,000
Linda (UK)	34	Degree	Lives with her husband and 2 (3 years and 7 months) children in a rented house	Part-time administrator	Primary school teacher	£21-30,000